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RUEHBJ/AMEMBASSY BEIJING 1248  
RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO 1115  
RUEHAK/AMEMBASSY ANKARA 3430  
RUEHIT/AMCONSUL ISTANBUL 1684  
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC  
RUEHVEN/USMISSION USOSCE 2262  
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RHEFDIA/DIA WASHDC  
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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 ASHGABAT 000279

SIPDIS

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SENSITIVE

STATE FOR SCA/CEN, EUR/ACE, SCA/PPD, ECA, DRL

E.O. 12958: N/A

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SUBJECT: TURKMENISTAN: COCKROACH OR NOT - OPPOSITION DISCREDITS  
ITSELF WITH EXAGGERATED REPORT BUT CAPTURES WESTERN MEDIA ATTENTION

¶1. (SBU) Sensitive but unclassified. Not for public Internet.

¶2. (SBU) SUMMARY: "Kronika Turkmenistana," an opposition website based in Bulgaria, recently carried an unlikely story that Turkmenistan TV's "Watan" newscast showed a cockroach walking across the news desk, which led to the firing or reprimand of 30 employees. The odd story has spread through international news media rapidly, with little effort to confirm its accuracy. Based on post's investigation, the story appears to be a broad exaggeration and an alarming example of poor reporting by Turkmen opposition activists abroad. END SUMMARY.

THE COCKROACH STORY BREAKS IN CYBERSPACE

¶3. (SBU) The cockroach story first appeared on Kronika Turkmenistana's website on February 19, 2008. The Russian language article claimed that a nationwide "Watan" news broadcast in early February showed a cockroach running across the newscaster's desk. The problem went unnoticed by officials, and therefore was seen again during standard repeat broadcasts. After the scurrying cockroach was finally noticed during a morning re-broadcast the following day, thirty people lost their jobs or were reprimanded.

THE STORY HAS "LEGS" (BUT NOT SIX LEGS)

¶4. (SBU) Thanks to the peculiar nature of the story, international news media took notice. Multiple news outlets, including many mainstream English-language media, such as NPR, UPI, Fox News, the Guardian (UK), and Daily Telegraph (UK) carried even less accurate versions of events. For example, the newer versions of the story related only the "firing" of 30 employees and had no mention of reprimands. Later, even more embellished versions claimed President Berdimuhamedov fired the 30 employees personally, even though the original article never indicated this.

MEANWHILE IN TURKMENISTAN...

¶5. (SBU) Post's Public Affairs Section (PAS) was unable to find any individual who saw the offending cockroach in early February broadcasts. There were no sightings of the alleged vermin. Most

people were entirely unaware of any an accusation involving an insect cameo. Unfortunately, PAS recordings of the early February broadcasts had already been erased. Even so, the PAS staff -- who regularly monitor the news -- swear that they would have noticed and reported on any unexpected insect appearances. Likewise, PAS saw no indications of a major purging of TV staff. UK Ambassador Peter Butcher told Charge BBC Monitoring checked all of its tapes and definitively reported, "There was no cockroach on air."

16. (SBU) On February 26, a key Ministry of Culture contact admitted that there had been an insect problem. He cautiously and tensely gave Post's CAO his version of events, noting that no insect was ever "on air." An ant came across the news desk before any video was recorded. Staff members who were ordered to take care of the ant problem replied in a disrespectful, insubordinate manner. The program director (not the president) fired the three (not 30) insubordinate employees. The contact also placed blame on "yellow journalists" and Russian sources for using the story to mock Turkmenistan.

19. (SBU) COMMENT: Obviously, Post cannot confirm the Ministry of Culture's informal version of events, but the fact that our contact discussed the issue so openly and frankly is an unusual act of sincerity in itself. In addition, as much as this culture thrives on rumor, had anything remotely like the cockroach firings happened, it would have spread like wildfire. With no eyewitnesses and not even a "YouTube" submission showing the cockroach (or perhaps ant), post is certain that the alleged cockroach never appeared on the air. This is the most colorful example of frequent exaggerations or twisted reports from Turkmen exile or opposition websites and calls into question the accuracy of their claims in general. While post welcomes alternative, independent reporting from Turkmenistan, the "case of the cockroach" has clearly discredited "Kronika

ASHGABAT 00000279 002 OF 002

Turkmenistana." It also reminds us that mainstream media -- without routine access to the country -- prefer to report on "eccentric and quirky" Turkmenistan -- especially if the story is "too good to check." END COMMENT.

HOAGLAND